



Book Review: *A Question of Balance: How France and the United States Created Cold War Europe* by Michael Creswell

by Nicholas Evan Sarantakes

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In studies of Cold War strategy, the dominant theme for several decades has been the influence of the Americans on the course of events. More internationally minded scholars have often looked at the role of the British during the early days of this non-conflict.

Since 1990 a new trend in the literature has emerged. Those scholars with Eastern European language skills have gone into the archives of the former Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies and produced many interesting studies of varying importance. Accounts of the western alliance that focus on nations speaking languages other than English have been few and far between.

As a result, Michael Creswell's study of the French role in the emerging western alliance is important in and of itself. What makes this study even more important, though, is the provocative and revisionist argument that he advances. First, he shows the ties between World War II and the Cold War. Many French leaders were worried about a resurgent Germany. This concern was a legitimate one. France had been the battleground for three Franco-German wars in the preceding 70 years.

Other French leaders realized that for France to survive in this new post-war era, it needed the Germans along with the Americans and British. The result was an intense domestic political battle in Paris. The immediate issue was the European Defense Community, a supra-national army that would have French and German troops serving together. What control would France have over French units? How many and under what conditions would Germans serve in this new formation? The larger issue at stake in these debates was the future of the western alliance.

The second factor that makes Creswell's account significant is that he shows the influence of the second tier powers. The debate in France, which was understandably quite emotional given French experiences between 1914-1918 and 1939-1945, would determine much of how the western alliance developed. Creswell's study shows that the Cold War was never a simple bi-polar confrontation between Washington and Moscow; the British were never to the Americans what the Greeks were to the Romans. The middle-ranking powers on the continent—none more than France—had their say in the formation of Western Europe, a point Creswell makes with his subtitle.

The French were not being difficult just to be difficult. The Eisenhower administration planned to reduce the presence of U.S. troops in Europe and wanted to use its nuclear arsenal for a defensive perimeter off European soil. France and Germany would provide conventional troops and by implication the battlefields for World War III. Needless to say, this idea did not strike French leaders as a particularly good one. They wanted a U.S. and British commitment to the

continent and eventually agreed among themselves that the best way to use German resources was to give the new Federal Republic full membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

One of the major themes that emerges from this book is the importance of diplomacy in its classical definition. American and French leaders had honest policy disagreements, they talked to one another and came to agreements that served the interests of both nations. The United States was the stronger nation, but its power had limits. American officials were good at managing and leading the western alliance, which is different from expecting smaller powers to do whatever the big power decides to do.

This study is international in its focus and Creswell has done the research to support his case. He has done extensive research in France, Belgium, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In France, his research had a joint and interagency approach with examinations of material in the French National Archives as well as the specialized archives of the French Foreign Ministry, Army, Air Force and Navy. Although this book is about U.S.-French relations, his research in British archives is on par with what he did in France. The use of the NATO archives shows his comprehensive approach.

About the Reviewer

Nicholas Evan Sarantakes is an associate professor of strategy and policy at the Naval War College. He has a Ph.D. in history from the University of Southern California, and is the author of *Keystone: The American Occupation of Okinawa and U.S.-Japanese Relations* (2000).

About the Book

Michael Creswell, *A Question of Balance: How France and the United States Created Cold War Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). 238 pgs. ISBN 978-0-674-02297-3. \$52.50.

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